

After the Gate Closed by [insomniacwriter17](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Big Sister Nancy, Christmas Fluff, Christmas at the Hendersons, Fluff, Hopper is a GREAT DAD, Hurt/Comfort, Jonathan babysits, Lucas plans a date, Ms. Henderson is a great mom, Multi, Nightmares, SO MUCH FLUFF, Spoilers!, Steve tries his best, it's finally time for Jane to join society, mentions of abuse, post-season two, pure fluff, teenagers in loooooove

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove (mentioned), Bromance for Dustin and Steve, Claudia Henderson, Dustin Henderson, Eleven, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jim Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Eleven, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Will Byers, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Max/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & Max, Steve Harrington/Dustin Henderson

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Summary:

Listen, I don't know what this is. I just have a lot of feelings after season two and no way to get those feelings out because no one in my life enjoys this show like I do. So this is just one shot about all the little head canons I have. They aren't connected unless stated!! Tags added as necessary!

CURRENT CHAPTER:

Steve visits the Henderson home for Christmas.

1. Unspoken

Author's Note:

Jonathan doesn't know how to deal with all the people staying in his house after the events of the night. Luckily, he's not the only one.

Silence had taken over the Byers' household. It spread thickly over each room, heavy, taunting. It was almost too silent to believe the absolute shit storm that had gone on just hours before. Remnants of Steve and Billy's fight lingered – jostled shelves of knickknacks and rugs askew, though Billy had been gone when the gang returned to the house.

When they returned from the cabin with Will, chaos erupted. People chattering all at once and trying to help in the best way they could, cold towels being passed to Joyce, Nancy, and Jonathan to help cool them down. Wet, sweaty clothes were stripped off and replaced with clean dry ones, and it seemed like just as that insanity died down, Eleven and Jim appeared in the doorway.

Things moved at a million miles an hour around Jonathan, and it seemed like he was left behind, just following after his mom and brother, doing what they needed. Maybe if he could just keep them okay, then he'd eventually begin to feel okay. So he just sat in the back corner of Will's room and waited to be needed, though it soon became apparent that people didn't need him in here.

Eventually, Jonathan couldn't take silently watching. Though he knew his brother was going to be okay, Jonathan couldn't keep studying Will's rising and falling chest, his sunken eyes and pale skin, his matted hair. It made Jonathan's chest tighten to see him look so close to death, knowing that had been exactly where he was. And he couldn't even retreat to his own room, because it had been taken over by Jim, El, and Mike (much to Jim's reluctance). Nancy, after making sure Jonathan was okay with it, had gone to sit with Mike. "I just feel like I need to be with my brother," she had whispered and Jonathan had nodded, knowing exactly what that felt like.

So Jonathan found himself looking into the living room where most of the kids were huddled. Max was balled up at the end of the couch, her arms wrapped protectively around her stomach. Her head lagged against the back of the couch, and even though Jonathan hadn't seen much of her before today – just a glimpse around town now and again – he somehow knew that she was more relaxed in sleep than she ever dared to be awake.

Beside her, Lucas had his legs stretched out in front of him, feet crossed at the ankles and his arms crossed over his chest. His head was turned toward Max and had obviously fallen asleep watching her. Dustin was laid across the rest of the couch, his feet in Lucas' lap. His hat had slipped down in front of his eyes and he was snoring quietly.

"You still awake, Byers?" Steve's voice cut through the quiet, and Jonathan looked to the love seat in the corner where Steve was slumped, holding an icepack to his head. Jonathan just nodded silently, not moving from where he leaned against the doorframe. "Is your brother okay?" was his next question.

"Yeah," Jonathan cleared his throat. "The room just got really small?" he admitted almost reluctantly. He didn't necessarily *want* to talk to Steve Harrington of all people about his emotions, but tonight seemed surreal enough that maybe he'd let it slide.

"I know the feeling," the words fell out of Steve's mouth easily, and Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "Jesus, then your chest gets tight and everything is so loud but also so quiet and you can't breathe?"

Silence. Then, the tiniest of nods from Jonathan. A silent agreement, an unspoken connection that yeah, I understand.

Steve nodded right back. Then he sighed and looked around the room. "These kids are tough as hell."

"Yeah," Jonathan agreed. Still Jonathan felt out of place, having nowhere to even sit in his own living room. He truly just didn't fit with all these people in his house. He took one last sweeping glance across the room, thinking maybe he'd grab his car keys and go sit in his car for a minute, just until his chest stopped feeling like it was

being sat on by an elephant. Then he'd go sit in Will's room again, just suck it up and be a man.

The silence was broken once again, but there was no talking. It was just Steve shifting from his spread out position across the love seat to where he was sitting up. After Jonathan didn't move for a second, Steve raised his eyebrow and gestured silently to the seat beside him.

Jonathan stepped over the bunched up rug and sat beside Steve. Neither of them said anything as they studied the dim room and the sleeping kids in it. Jonathan didn't say anything, neither did Steve. They didn't need to.

When Steve dozed off with his head dangerously close to Jonathan's shoulder, Jonathan didn't say anything. When Max shifted in her sleep and knocked a book to the floor and both Jonathan and Steve jumped straight up off the sofa, ready to fight with wide eyes and baited breath, they said nothing.

When Steve jolted awake from his light sleep feeling like he couldn't catch his breath, Jonathan didn't say anything. He just reached out and carefully, hesitantly put his hand on Steve's shoulder. Just as quickly as it was there, it was gone.

But Steve understood.

It was unspoken.

And if both of them slept soundly side by side that night, neither of them would ever admit that either.

2. Home

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper and Eleven have lived in this tiny cabin for so long, but now things are different. Some things are normal, some things are new. But now, the cabin is home.

Hopper had gotten used to being alone. Then he found Eleven in the woods that night and suddenly, he never had alone time. That kid was *everywhere*. She followed him around like a stray puppy, not that he could really blame her. She had to be lonely, being stuck in a cabin deep in the woods with no one around during the day. And while “word of the day” and television captured her attention for a while, Jim knew she spent a lot of the day bored out of her mind.

Though he knew all these things, it didn’t stop him from sometimes being irritated that their space was just too damn small. But then Eleven had disappeared, and the space felt way too big. Then everything with the gate, and Will, and the dema-whatevers that Dustin kid called them, and Jim didn’t mind the small space because he could keep an eye on his girl.

His girl. It seemed simultaneously so wrong and so normal to think about. His girl. But after everything they’d been through, Jim couldn’t think of anywhere else he’d want her to be. And it had been a few weeks since the onslaught of insanity, but things had drifted into what seemed to be a new normal. Jim and Eleven – *Jane*, he reminded himself – still did their word of the day, and she still seemed to flit around the cabin like she was made of air.

And Jim still couldn’t stop himself from grumbling out an angry, “Jesus, kid, you can’t *do* that!” when she appeared behind him while making breakfast. “One of these days I’m going to drop this pan on your head and you’ll be very displeased.” He lifted the pan far enough above Jane’s head that he wouldn’t hit her, skirting around her to the small table he had set up for them.

“Dis...displeased?” Jane shuffled behind Jim, and he smirked to

himself.

“Displeased,” he repeated, scooping egg onto the plates. “That’s your word of the day. Means you’re unhappy, you don’t like something.”

Jane nodded and slid into her seat, picking up the freshly toasted Eggo with one hand, pointing to the scrambled egg with the other. “Displeased.” She had a small smile on her face, like she knew she was testing Jim.

“You know the drill, kid. You have to eat the eggs too. Little girls can’t survive on Eggos alone.”

“Non-negotiable,” Jane quipped, picking up the fork beside her plate. It was her word from yesterday.

“Exactly, non-negotiable,” Jim nodded. “I’m going to get dressed, kid. Eat your eggs.” And just like every day, when he came back into the kitchen in his uniform, the eggs were gone from her plate. Some days, his portion of eggs was suspiciously larger than it had been, but he pretended not to notice that.

But with the normal things came things that were new. Jim and Jane both cared much less for the new things than for the normal. Things like the nightmares. Oh, god, the nightmares. They were bad enough for Jim, and he was a grown-ass man. He’d wake up in the middle of the night, sweat-soaked shirt sticking to his body, sitting up and trying to shake the visions of monsters and dark tunnels from his mind.

But Jane? Oh, his heart broke for Jane. More nights than not, she’d pretend to not notice the sun go down, the time get later, and ignored Jim’s statement that it was time for her to get ready for bed. “Come on, kid,” he’d sigh. “You can’t stay awake forever.” And Jane would always look at him with these big sad eyes, and Hopper couldn’t tell her no.

But he’d learned that he could coax her into some pajamas and they’d sit on the couch watching whatever was on television, and after a while her weight would get heavy beside him, eventually giving way to sleep completely. Then Jim would carry Jane to her bed, get her

settled, and hope that tonight would be the night she didn't wake up terrified.

Some nights it worked, some nights it didn't. More often than not, he would wake up to the sound of Jane shuffling around the cabin, worriedly wringing her hands or the hem of whatever shirt she was wearing.

But tonight when Jim awoke, he heard quiet whispering in addition to her shuffling. "Not real. Not real. Home. Home. Hop and cabin. Home."

Hopper kicked the sheets down and stood up, making his way to her. "Hey, kid," he whispered, trying not to startle her. But she jumped anyway, and his heart tugged, knowing he'd failed. "Hey, what's going on in that noggin?"

"Bad," Jane whispered. "Bad. Bad. Bad." She had turned to face him, and Hopper could see tear tracks on her cheeks. He'd never done well with tears, but Hop wasn't a quitter.

"Hey, listen here," Jim carefully took her wrists in his hands, crouching in front of her. "You're good. God damn, kid, you saved the world. You saved Will. You saved Hawkins, and...and all your little friends. And you saved me, and most importantly, you saved yourself. You are not bad."

Jane didn't say anything in response, but her chest rose and fell with more quiet sobs. "Not bad," Hopper repeated, tugging her closer now that she was calmer. Jane allowed the movement, so Jim pulled her into a hug.

There they stayed, crouched on the floor of the dark cabin, until Jane's cries quieted. "Not...bad," she finally whispered. Jim nodded immediately.

"Not bad." He confirmed. "You're good. So good. Always good." He pulled away and locked eyes with Jane. "You understand me, kid?" A small, silent nod. "Say it for me."

"Good," Jane whispered, her hand coming to point at her chest. Jim

nodded, smiling sleepily. As if mirroring Jim's feelings, Jane yawned and pushed more of her weight against Jim until the man picked her up as gingerly as he could. "Let's get some sleep," he whispered as he carried her back toward her bed.

He laid her down, covered her with the blanket, and pulled a chair up beside the bed to sit with her. Jim knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, but he'd stay with Jane to make sure she did. *At least one of us should be rested*, he thought.

Jim looked around the small cabin; the living room messy with papers and books strewn about by Jane throughout the day, the kitchen with dirty dishes in the sink he'd forgone in favor of telling Jane about the neighborhood-wide chase for a dog just to see her laugh, and his bed, halfway covered with washed laundry he hadn't yet put away because he'd been in a rush to make dinner for them.

Jane had only been here a short time, but god, had she imprinted herself on this place. She was everywhere. What once had been just a forgotten cabin was now home to one of the brightest little girls Hopper had ever known.

Jane was still for a few minutes, and Jim's eyes had drifted shut, arms crossed over his chest. Just as he was about to nod off, he felt the something poking him in the knee. Jim was just about to open his eyes when he heard the quietest whisper.

"Good."

3. Mediocre Spaghetti

Summary for the Chapter:

Max takes a late-night skate, then discovers help in the last place she thought to look. She wasn't even looking really, she just stumbled upon it. But hell, she was going to take it.

Gravel cracked loudly under the wheels of Max's skateboard as she flew down the road as fast as her legs would allow. Every few moments she'd toss a paranoid look over her shoulder, afraid that she'd see the growing headlights of Billy's car.

When she'd snuck out her window, her plan had been to go to Lucas' house, but as she rolled up to his house, there was an unfamiliar car in the driveway. Suddenly Max remembered the out-of-town cousins that were supposed to visit Lucas and his family tonight, so she skated right past, balling the sleeve of her jacket in her hand to swipe at defiant tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Where can I go? she thought miserably. Dustin's house was in the opposite direction, and Max was not going to risk skating directly past her asshole of a stepbrother. Will had quietly mentioned that morning in science that he and his family were going out to cabin to have dinner with Hopper and El, so his house was a no-go. And things were still so awkward with Mike that she wasn't going to go his house – she hadn't even met his parents yet.

Yeah, she definitely wasn't in the mood to do that tonight.

At this point Max had zero idea of where she was going, she just knew she didn't want to stand still in fear of her brother finding her. She wound up in Loch Nora, careening around corners and looking at houses triple the size of hers. Fancy cars, literal white picket fences. It was almost nauseating.

Then she rounded a corner and spotted a familiar car, causing her to gasp loudly and nearly crash from how fast she changed directions. There were few lights on in the house, and she just hoped he was

home.

Ditching her board behind one of the well-trimmed bushes, Max ran up the steps of the house then hesitated, her hand raised to knock. *This is dumb*, she thought. *I shouldn't be here.* Just then, she heard a car turn onto the street. Panic rose in her throat, and she closed her eyes, dropping her knuckles to the wood.

Looking over her shoulder, Max watched a brand new red SUV cruise by the house, not even slowing. Relief washed over her. Maybe Billy hadn't followed her. But then the door opened, spilling light onto the dark porch, and she turned, eyes wide.

Steve Harrington had never fully understood the saying "deer caught in the headlights". The only deer he'd seen in his headlights hadn't faltered – it bounded across the road without so much as a look at him.

But seeing Max standing on his front porch – gasping for breath, eyes wide in panic with remnants of tears threatening to spill – that he understood. That was not good. "Max? Hey, what's wrong? God, it's freezing...get in here!" he stepped back from the doorway and gestured for the girl to come in.

"I-I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry. This was a mi-mistake," Max tried to take a step back, but Steve interrupted.

"Nonsense, you must be over here for a reason," he reached out and grabbed her shoulder gently, but didn't miss how she flinched. He fought the urge to frown. "At least come in and warm up a bit first." Steve's voice was soft. Not uncharacteristically so, because since everything had gone down with the shadow monster and all that mess, he'd formed a soft spot for these little pests.

Reluctantly, Max let herself get pulled inside. Standing in the entry way, the redhead wrapped her arms around herself while Steve closed the door and turned to her, his hands on his hips. "Now, what's happened? What are you doing? And don't say nothing!" he added the last statement quickly after Max had readied herself to answer.

Steve was smart, Max knew that much. Steve had also seen her shit of a brother when he was mad, and there was a still healing cut on his cheek to prove that. She had to try not to cringe. God, the concerned look on Steve's face was making it impossible for her to lie. She sighed loudly and her shoulders sagged forward. "My stepdad and Billy," she mumbled. "They were having this huge fight." She stopped and looked away from Steve, biting her lip and angrily reminding herself, *don't you dare cry, you baby.*

"Jesus, kid," Steve's eyebrows furrowed in concern. "I'm sorry." He looked from her to the hallway to his left, and he cleared his throat. "Uh, have you eaten dinner yet? It's not like, gourmet food by any means, but I was making spaghetti," he offered lamely. *Great one, Harrington. Fix her shitty home life with some pasta!*

Max gnawed at her lip nervously, looking like she was considering the idea. "Your...your parents wouldn't mind?" she finally squeaked nervously. Steve scoffed and waved his hand in her direction.

"My parents are gone. Cincinnati, some conference thing," then he smiled. "Come on, I'll make you a plate." Turning on his heel, Steve began to walk away, and Max followed, not wanting to be left alone. *Well, guess I'm staying.*

Max's eyes trailed around her surroundings as she trailed behind Steve, taking in the house. There were a few formally framed pictures of Steve and his parents throughout the years, but little more personalization than that. But hey, at least they had family portraits made.

When she entered the kitchen, she took a deep breath, swallowing quickly as her mouth watered. Steve was standing at the stove, plates of pasta in hand. He turned around with a smile on his face and gestured to the barstool near the counter. "Go on and sit down," he commanded gently, sliding one plate in front of her, the other in front of the seat beside her.

"Thank you," she offered meekly. "It looks really good."

"Don't say that before you try it," Steve teased. "It's just pasta and a bottled sauce," he opened the fridge and brought over two bottles of

water, plopping into the other chair and handing her the drink. Max took it immediately with a grateful nod, drinking a fair bit before putting it down. Even in the chill of the Indiana winter, apparently skating across town can make someone thirsty.

The two ate in silence for a few minutes before Steve couldn't take it anymore. He was too worried. Too many questions were unanswered. He'd driven the munchkins home before, he knew damn well that Max would've had to pass Lucas' house and Will's before arriving here.

"Look, Red, I'm not going to ask for details, but I just need you to tell me something. And don't take this the wrong way," he rambled. "But why didn't you go to the Sinclair's house? Or Dustin's? Even Will's? They live so much closer. You had to work to get over here." Steve had put down his fork and was watching Max intently. He didn't miss how she seemed to wither in her seat.

Max felt tears burning at the back of her eyes. "Lucas has family over," she whispered. "I didn't want to take all this shit to them. And Will's with Hop at the cabin. And-" she paused again to swallow to keep the tennis ball sized lump in her throat from moving up further. "And I didn't want to turn back for Dustin's in case Billy was looking for me," she admitted.

Steve's concern morphed into confusion, then something akin to anger. "Why would Billy be looking for you? The fight didn't involve you."

Max looked up at him, and there was a fight in her eyes that hadn't been there a moment ago. Like the tears had turned to rage. "Well, Billy really can't hit his dad, now can he?" Max's voice wavered, not matching the look in her eyes. Steve's stomach went cold.

"Shit," he breathed, rubbing a hand over his face. "Max..."

The girl just looked down at her half-finished plate of food. "I...I shouldn't have said that," she realized.

"No, no, you should have," Steve protested, standing and moving toward her. He wrapped the child in a hug, feeling her stiffen in his

embrace. "Max, that's not cool."

She was silent, but she relaxed the tiniest bit. "Listen, you can hang out here as long as you need to," Steve heard himself offering. *Is that weird?* he wondered to himself before letting the thought go. Just for tonight, he decided. Then he could talk to Hopper. Or Joyce. Or someone more equipped to handle emotional baggage than himself.

"I can't do that," Max sighed, shaking her head and pulling away. "They'll be looking for me."

"You can't go home," Steve retorted reasonably. "I won't let you."

"What? Now you're kidnapping me?" Max teased quietly, swiping at her eyes stealthily. Steve pretended not to notice. "Only if you're sure," she relented after a minute.

"There's a spare room upstairs. I can get you some clothes to sleep in, and tomorrow before school I can drop you like a block away so no one even knows you were here with me," *So Billy doesn't see*, he thought to himself.

So they finished their spaghetti in a much more comfortable silence, then Steve led Max upstairs. He showed her the guest room, complete with a bathroom and clean sheets, and brought her an old pair of running shorts and a shirt. "Make yourself at home," he insisted, "I'm going to clean up dinner." Then he was gone, leaving her to her own devices.

Max emerged from the room about thirty minutes later, having showered and changed. She crept downstairs to where she could hear a TV playing, and she found Steve slumped to the side of the couch, dozing to the evening news. "Thank you," she whispered into the room before scurrying upstairs and all but diving into the guest bed. She'd never tell anyone, but it was the best sleep she'd had since the night they all stayed together after the gate closed.

And the next morning, as Steve drove them both into town toward school, he glanced over at the girl. "Look, this isn't my story to tell," he told her. Max looked a bit relieved to hear that, he noticed. "But, I'm here for you if you need me. If you need me to talk, or listen, or

just a place to escape...you can.” There was no verbal response from Max, and Steve took his eyes off the road a moment to look at her.

“Really?” she whispered incredulously. “I...” she trailed off, not sure what to say; so she turned her attention to the skateboard leaned against her knees.

“Here,” Steve pulled to the side of the road, rummaging through his glovebox and finding a bookmark he’d tossed in there Lord knows when. He also found a pen and scribbled something in the margin, then handed it to Max. “That’s my number. Call me if you need a ride, or a place to go, or even some mediocre spaghetti,” he smiled, trying to lighten the mood.

“Thank you,” Max’s voice was a trembling whisper as she shoved the bookmark in her pocket. Shaky hands searched for the door handle of the car. “I can ride from here,” she told Steve. And he nodded, trusting her. But before she stepped out of the car, he squeezed her arm.

“You’re tough, you know that?” he told her. And she just nodded before closing the door and beginning to propel herself down the street. Steve watched her red hair fly behind her until she turned the corner, and he hoped she knew just how seriously he’d meant everything he said.

Then he put his car into drive, trying to figure out how in the hell he was going to walk the halls, see Billy Hargrove, and not pummel the guy to death.

4. Big Brother Byers

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan Byers puts a lot of his identity in being a big brother. Whether that means jamming out to mix tapes to block out fighting parents, fighting freaky shadow monsters, or watching a crappy Western movie, Jonathan will do whatever it takes to be the best big brother he can be - to whoever needs it.

“You’re sure you don’t mind staying with them both?” Joyce fret, and Jonathan took his mom by the shoulders and nodded.

“I’m sure, Ma. Go. It’s a few hours, and you’re just at the school. It’s a PTA meeting. If I need back up, I can call,” After everything that happened in the past year or so, Jonathan’s gotten great at talking his mom down from a panic. “I know the school number.”

“Okay,” Joyce sighed and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Let me go say goodnight to Will one more time.” Before she could move, an obnoxious honk sounded outside, causing both Jonathan and Joyce to jump. “Jesus, Jim!” she groaned, clutching her chest dramatically. Jonathan laughed, because everyone knew patience was not Hopper’s strong suit.

“Will’s already asleep, Mom. Go on.” Jonathan nodded encouragingly, and Joyce bowed her head for a moment, giving in.

“Okay. Call if anything -“

“If anything happens,” Jonathan nodded before all but pushing his mom out the door. He watched out the window as Joyce climbed into Jim’s truck, then he locked the front door, flopped down onto the couch and turned on the TV.

He knew down the hall, Will slept fitfully in his own room, and for tonight, El was tucked into Jonathan’s bed. Since Hopper had to be at this PTA meeting, he’d smuggled Eleven into town and brought her into the Byers’ home for the night. Risky, given the past

circumstances, but ever since closing the gate, Eleven didn't ever want to be alone. And no one blamed her.

Jane, Jonathan reminded himself. Her name's Jane, now. But Jonathan knew that he could call her Jane for a million years, but she'd always be El to their group. Because El was the girl who saved them all.

Finding some old western movie that seemed halfway interesting, Jonathan tossed the remote onto the couch beside him and settled into the sofa. Anything to cover the settling quiet of his house. God, this house must be cursed. After everything that happened, how could it not be?

He dozed for a while, but after the fridge clanged loudly for the third time, he got up and decided to check on the sleeping kids. Almost teens, he reminded himself as he shuffled down the hall. Will would be thirteen in a few weeks, and Jane...well, who knew, really.

Jonathan stopped in front of his own room first, knocking quietly then opening the door. Jane was curled up in the very corner of Jonathan's bed, her back pressed against the wall. In her arms she clutched the teddy bear Hopper had found somewhere for her that she hadn't been without since the night the gate had closed.

Jonathan remembered El waking up that night the gate closed - and her immediately beginning to wail. Not scream, not cry, just wailing. Loud and shrill and heartbreaking. Joyce has immediately gone into Mom Mode, pushing the bear into Eleven's arms and rocking her gently while yelling comforting words in her ears. Somehow, Joyce was able to yell loud enough that Eleven could hear her over the screaming, but her words were still comforting enough that soon the cabin was silent aside from Joyce's shushing, Eleven's sobbing, and Jonathan and Jim standing to the side, helpless.

Shaking his head as if it would clear the memory from his head, Jonathan turned and closed his door, quietly entering Will's. To his surprise, Will was climbing out of bed, rubbing tired eyes. "Hey bud," Jonathan's voice was gentle. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"Water," Will mumbled, sliding past his brother and down the hall.

Jonathan followed after him.

“You haven’t slept yet, have you?” Jonathan asked knowingly. Will shrugged and took a few sips of water as he leaned against the counter.

“A little. It’s just...I dunno,” Will trailed off quietly, looking down at his bare feet.

“You can tell me,” Jonathan promised, though he knew Will knew that.

“I...the room’s so big when I’m alone,” Will whispered. And it was then that it dawned on Jonathan that every night since the gate had closed (and most of the nights before that, even), Joyce had slept in the room with Will. Jonathan had just assumed that was for his mom’s benefit.

“Then come out here with me,” Jonathan suggested easily, gesturing to the couch. “I wouldn’t mind the company,” he admitted. Will looked up at his big brother through the curtain of overgrown bangs, and Jonathan smiled encouragingly before grabbing his brother by the arm and leading him to the couch.

Jonathan sat and Will immediately curled up on the couch beside him, using Jonathan’s jean-clad thigh as a pillow. Jonathan’s hand instinctually began to fiddle with Will’s hair, and he felt Will’s tension begin to slowly dissipate.

The shitty Western still played on the television, and Jonathan began to doze himself. He faltered in the half-awake, half-asleep mode for awhile, unsure of whether he could trust the world wouldn’t fall to hell if he slept.

Apparently, exhaustion won that battle, because Jonathan was too asleep to hear his bedroom door creak open, and the quiet shuffling of Eleven’s feet down the hall.

“Jonathan?” Her voice was soft and quiet, like always. Eleven cocked her head to the side and studied him, how he leaned his head against the back of the couch and slept with his mouth open.

“Jonathan?” She tried again, a little louder, though her voice faltered. Panic immediately began to set in when again, neither brother awoke. What if they weren’t sleeping? What if they were...

“Jonathan??”

That time, Jonathan awoke. “What is it, El?” Jonathan’s head flew up, immediately awake after the more panicked call. “What’s wrong?” He grabbed her shoulder with one hand, looking her up and down for any signs of injury. All he saw was her flinch in fear. The other hand clasped protectively at Will, who surprisingly didn’t stir.

“Bad dream.” Her voice was small and quiet again, tiny hands clutching the stuffed bear even harder.

Jonathan didn’t say another word. He didn’t ask. He knew. He just wrapped his big brother arms around her and hugged her as tight as he dared. “You can stay here,” he promised, helping her climb onto the couch beside him. Her tiny body pressed heavily against his, still trembling from leftover memories of whatever hellish scenes had played in her head. “I got you.”

It took some time, but Eleven’s trembling faded and she melted into Jonathan’s side. Neither of them said anything, they didn’t need to. Eleven took comfort in knowing that Jonathan was awake and watching, and Jonathan felt an overwhelming sense of calm with both kids in his line of sight.

Somewhere down the line, even El fell asleep. Jonathan just looked down and her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and heavy while the grip on her bear had loosened slightly.

Then the stupid western movie ended and another started, but Jonathan wasn’t about to move his arm and risk waking either child. He could put up with a bad movie if it meant that these two exhausted kids finally got some rest.

And when Hopper and Joyce came home over an hour later, it was to the sight of all three kids sound asleep on the couch while credits rolled and an obnoxious song played.

“Should we move them?” Jim whispered after watching them for a moment, and Joyce immediately shook her head.

“Let them sleep,” she insisted softly. “I haven’t seen either of my boys look this close to okay in a long time,” her voice was sad and pleading, and Jim just nodded. He knew the feeling, because he felt it too. The two of them studied their children, and Jim’s arm wrapped around Joyce’s shoulders comfortingly.

“I agree,” his voice broke slightly as he watched El sleep. She looked so young right now - almost like she hadn’t saved the world twice and nearly died trying.

And Joyce took Hopper’s hand, the two parents standing and watching their kids sleep, hoping that one day, maybe they’d all heal.

5. The Big Day

Summary for the Chapter:

They'd all been waiting for this day for quite some time. But now it was Jane's Big Day, and they have a surprise for her.

It'd been a year since Jim's meeting with Dr. Owens in the diner; a year since he'd been handed the forged birth certificate. A long year of the same – hiding in the cabin, smuggling fun things to make the empty place feel like home to Jane, and a year of preparation for what had become known amongst the whole group as The Big Day.

"On The Big Day," Jim told Jane one morning as they sat down to breakfast, "I'm taking you to a diner so you can have a real waffle."

"Not real?" Jane's eyebrows furrowed as she looked at the food in her hands. It sure felt real? She was holding it.

"Well, no, wait, it's real," Hopper explained, stressing the real. "But it's just a frozen waffle. Fresh waffles are so much better. Bigger, too. Diner waffles are like three Eggos in one," He enjoyed watching Jane's eyes widen in excitement.

"Wow," Jane sounded absolutely awed by the idea, and Hopper smiled softly at her.

"How many more days?" he asked.

"One hundred and two," Jane replied almost immediately.

~*~

"On The Big Day, we'll take you to the mall to get some new clothes," Joyce promised from where she sat on the couch, mending the holes of Jane's favorite worn out sweater.

"What's a mall?" Jane asked curiously, watching intently as Joyce sewed.

"A mall is a place that has a bunch of stores all in one building. So you

can go to different places in one day without having to drive all over the city,” Joyce explained. “And they have all kinds of clothes, so I’m sure we’ll find something you like.”

“I get to choose?” Jane asked, a slight awe to her voice. Jane didn’t have much experience in choosing things. Hopper let her choose dinner sometimes, and every day she got to choose from the few clothes she had. But that was really it for now.

“You do, sweet girl,” Joyce replied with a soft voice. It broke Joyce’s heart to know that in all of Jane’s years of life, she’d never gotten to choose what clothes to buy. “How many days?” she asked, trying to distract Jane from the fact that such a simple question had almost brought Joyce to tears.

“Seventy-nine.”

~~*

“On The Big Day, maybe we can go minigolfing!” Mike grinned at Jane from the opposite end of the couch. It was Mike’s weekly visit out to the cabin to see her – supervised, of course. Hopper sat feet away at the dining table, pretending to not pay attention to them by scribbling on the daily crossword puzzle in the newspaper.

“What’s that?” Jane asked curiously.

“It’s...It’s like, you take this thing called a golf club and you use it to hit this little ball into a hole. But there’s obstacles and things in the way that make it hard. It’s really hard to actually explain, but I promise it’s fun.”

“Okay,” Jane nodded. If Mike promised, then she knew it had to be fun.

“And I can teach you how to hold the club and everything so that you learn how to play,” Mike told her.

“Like hell you will,” Hopper’s voice broke through their conversation. Immediately, Mike’s eyes widened and his cheeks turned red, even though Jane really didn’t understand why.

And when it was time for Mike to leave, he sighed and looked to her.

"Only twenty-six more days," Mike said to Jane.

"Twenty-six," Jane echoed.

~*~

The Big Day finally arrived. Jim woke up early, his stomach in nervous knots. Maybe they needed to wait longer, he thought. Maybe it still wasn't safe. Scrubbing his sleepy eyes with one hand, Jim stood to go make coffee.

All of his fears were quelled when he stopped in front of Jane's open door and saw her curled up in bed, still fast asleep. She deserved a day like today, he told himself. It'd been over a year since anything crazy had happened. They would be okay. With that knowledge, he went to get ready for The Big Day.

When Jane woke up to the smell of coffee, her stomach fluttered. *Today's The Big Day!* Immediately, she jumped up out of bed and ran into the kitchen, where she could hear Hopper flipping through the paper.

"The Big Day!" she exclaimed, her face beaming.

"Sure is! Are you excited?" Jim asked, though he knew the answer.

"Yes! Waffles, mall, mini golf," Jane recited, ticking the objects off on her fingers. Hopper nodded in agreement along with each one.

"Well, go get dressed then!" Jim instructed. "Can't take you into town in your pajamas."

And just as soon as Jane had appeared in the kitchen, she was gone. Jim could hear her in her room, getting ready. He was already dressed and ready for the day, having known that Jane would want to go as soon as she was awake.

Then it was time to leave. Hopper unlocked the door and opened it, stepping on the porch. He turned and gestured for Jane to follow. Nervously, she took a few steps past the door frame, looking around. "It's okay," Jim promised gently, extending his hand to Jane. She took it, finding comfort in the gesture.

Once in the car, Jane was ecstatic again. She looked out the windows, barely blinking, like she was drinking it all in. Hopper couldn't wipe his own grin off his face, and was still smiling as they pulled up to the diner.

"Waffles," Jane commented as she slid out of the car, coming to stand beside Jim again. She grasped his hand tightly as they made their way inside. A bell dinged above their head; Jane flinched the slightest bit, and Hopper squeezed her hand.

Luckily, The Big Day fell on a Tuesday, so the diner was almost empty aside from an older couple in the corner. On any other day, had Hopper been in uniform, Mr. Johnson probably would've recognized him. But today Hopper was wearing a simple black t-shirt, jeans, and a hat. Not that he was hiding from people, but he was just trying to lay low. Make sure that today was all about Jane.

Speaking of Jane, they had made their way to the booth in the corner, and Hopper let Jane slide in first. "Want me to sit next to you or across from you?"

"Next to?" Jane requested, and Jim slid in beside her without a second thought. When the waitress arrived, he ordered waffles for the both of them, coffee for himself, and orange juice for Jane. They didn't say much while waiting for their food, but when the first plate of waffles arrived, Jane's mouth dropped open in surprise.

Jim had barely moved to push the plate in front of her when Jane reached out and quickly snatched it from him. "Waffles," she breathed quietly.

"Yeah, kid. What'd I tell you? Much bigger than Eggos," he stated, smiling his thanks at the waitress when she dropped the next plate of waffles in front of him. Jane was already waiting with a fork in her hand, cutting at the food eagerly.

From the moment the first bite passed her lips, Jane grinned and her eyes could light up the darkest room. "Is it good?" Hopper asked.

"Yes!" she gasped. "So much better than Eggos," she agreed.

The poor diner waffle didn't stand a chance; soon Jane's waffle was completely gone, and she even stole a few bites of Jim's. "Well, how was that for part one of The Big Day?" Hopper smiled as he left some cash on the table to pay for the food and tip the waitress.

Jane nodded so hard he was a little afraid she was going to hurt herself. "Alright, well hop up in the truck. We've got clothes to buy."

~*~

An hour into the mall shopping trip, Jim was bored out of his mind by everything except the sheer excitement on Jane's face and Joyce's apparent love of taking a young girl shopping. There were piles and piles of clothes to be taken into dressing rooms, and with each trip in, Hop found his arms loaded with more clothes.

Jeans, shorts, dresses, and shirts crowded his lap while he listened to Joyce talk to Jane in the dressing room. "Oh, sweetie, that looks so pretty on you! Purple is a very good color on you."

"See how long the legs of the pants are? We need to find you some shorter ones so you don't trip all the time."

"You don't like that one? Okay, we can put it back! No, that's okay, sweetie! That's why we try things on before we buy them."

She was so calm and responsive to what Jane was saying. He was so grateful that she'd agreed to do this, because Jim knew he'd be shit at this. He probably couldn't really muster more than a 'Looks good, kid' or a 'Maybe we should look for something else'.

But then he heard Joyce say, "Let's show Hop, yeah?" And the dressing room door swung open to reveal Jane dressed in a pretty white blouse and some jeans.

"Oh, sweetie," Jim gasped. "That's so pretty. Kid, you look amazing!"

"Doesn't she?" Joyce squealed. "The off the shoulder top is so becoming on her!"

Jim just nodded like he knew what she was talking about. Then Jane bit her lip and looked between the adults. "Can I wear this the rest of

the day?" she requested, and though Joyce looked skeptical, Jim stood and made his way to her.

"Anything for you, kid. It's The Big Day, isn't it?" he replied, quickly taking his pocket knife and cutting the tags off the clothes. "I'll go pay for them right now."

The grin on her face lit up the whole room, made his heart swell, and he suddenly didn't mind that his wallet was going to be all but empty after this trip. Anything to get her to smile.

~*~

And it was with that mentality that Jim Hopper very reluctantly let Mike Wheeler teach Jane to golf.

With supervision, of course.

~*~

Nancy and Jonathan came to pick up Mike after the golf game finished, and then Jane and Jim collapsed into the truck once more. "So," Hopper sighed after a moment, turning his head to look at her. "Good Big Day?"

"Amazing," Jane grinned. "Thank you," her voice was soft.

"What if I told you there was more to the day, kid?" Hopper asked. Jane looked at him, confusion etched on her face.

"What?"

"Buckle up, kid. We got somewhere to be."

~*~

When they pulled up to the Byers' house, Jim tossed an innocent grin at Jane. "Come on, let's go." He took her hand and led her to the front door, knocking loudly before letting themselves inside.

It was eerily quiet in the house, but something smelled *incredible*. Jane's mouth was already watering. Hopper led her into the living

room, and immediately Jane's mouth dropped open in surprise.

All around the living room was, well, everybody. Max, Lucas, Will, and Dustin were perched on the couch. Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve were all squeezed onto the tiny loveseat in the corner. Joyce was standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, smiling at the duo in the doorway. And Mike was beside her, grinning from ear to ear. "Surprise!" he exclaimed.

Jane looked up at Hopper with an almost confused look. "What?"

"Wheeler put this together," Jim explained. "He wanted to celebrate you making it to The Big Day."

"You're officially a part of Hawkins now," Dustin exclaimed.

"And what better way to celebrate than with your whole family?" Mike asked, gesturing to the people around the room.

Jane's face lit up once more, and god *damn it*, Hopper was not crying. When he looked down at Jane again, he found her wiping her own eyes on the sleeve of her new shirt. Immediately Mike was across the room and hugging her, and it took but a moment for everyone to be part of a giant group hug. Including Hopper – but if anyone asked, he'd deny it.

Maybe.

Joyce pulled away from the hug earlier than everyone else, and she reached out to put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "Congrats," she whispered. "This is a big day for you, too, ya know."

"I know," Jim whispered. Then he grabbed her hand. "Thanks for everything you did today. The shopping, this, it's just...thank you."

"You're welcome," she whispered. The two of them locked eyes for a moment, and after what seemed like forever, Joyce managed to break the eye contact and pulled away.

"Let's eat, guys!" she called, and nothing can make teenage boys move faster than the mention of food. Pretty soon everyone was squished into the living room with plates of hot dogs and macaroni

and cheese and chips, talking loudly over one another and just having a good time.

They all stayed in the Byers living room late into the night, and it wasn't until Jane had fallen asleep on the floor propped against Steve's legs that Hopper decided they needed to head home. So he picked Jane up and carried her to the truck, driving home in a peaceful silence.

Jane was still asleep when Hopper pulled up to the cabin, so he carried her inside and straight to her bed. Just as he was lifting the blankets to make sure Jane didn't get cold, her eyes opened the slightest bit.

"Shh, it's alright. We're home," Hopper whispered. "You can sleep."

"Best day ever," Jane murmured. "Thank you."

Hopper smiled, ruffling Jane's hair. "Anything for you, sweet girl."

And just like that, Jane went to sleep and The Big Day was done.

6. Love Guru

Summary for the Chapter:

Lucas wants to plan a good date for him to take Max on for their first real date, but he doesn't know much about dating. He tries to figure out who does.

Steve knows a lot about dating. He tries to figure out how on earth the damn kid had gotten his phone number.

After the Snow Ball, Lucas couldn't stop thinking about how much he wanted to take Max out on a real date. But he knew nothing about dating – why would he? He was a twelve-year-old boy that, let's face it, didn't really hang out with a cool enough crowd for them to know how to date.

And his dad was so old fashioned that had Lucas brought up dating, he'd get a lecture on waiting until he was older because he was too young to be worrying about that right now. And his mother would take the same stance; so Lucas just didn't bother.

He couldn't ask his group of friends because of two reasons: 1) Max was *in* his group of friends, and 2) they didn't know anything about dating. The only person in the group in any kind of relationship was Mike and El, but that was...different.

It wasn't until Dustin mentioned something about Steve Harrington that Lucas realized *exactly* who he needed to talk to. The only problem with that was the only time Lucas saw Steve, there were other people around. So he'd have to get creative.

After school that day, Lucas was quick to get on his bike and head home. "What's gotten into you?" Dustin gasped as he tried to keep up with his friend. "Jesus Christ, slow down!"

"Can't! Sorry! I have to do something at home!" Lucas called over his shoulder, speeding up. "I'll radio you later!" Dustin watched him pedal away, shaking his head in confusion.

Lucas pumped the pedals of his bike at top speed the whole way home, and as soon as he got home, he made his way into his dad's office. Rummaging around the desk, Lucas managed to find the phone book.

He was so sure this was going to work, but then he found the 'H' page. "Shit," he mumbled. There were like six Harrington listings, and without knowing Steve's parents' names, this was useless.

Irritated, Lucas slammed the book shut and put it back on the shelf where his father kept it. "Well now what?" he grumbled to himself. Defeated, Lucas went up to his room and flopped down onto his bed. Maybe he was destined to be alone forever.

He wallowed in self-pity for a few minutes, then sat up and grabbed his walkie-talkie. "Dustin? Are you there? Over."

A few moments of silence, then the crackling that came before a response. "Here. Is everything okay? Over."

"Great. I-I got the day wrong so I rushed home for nothing! Over." Lucas lied, wincing slightly. He felt bad lying to his friends.

"Aw man, that sucks. Well, my mom's making lasagna for dinner; she asked if you wanted to come? Over."

"I'll have to check with my mom, but I'm sure it'll be okay! I'll call you when I know, okay? Over."

"Okay. Hey, Lucas? If something's wrong, you know you can tell me, right? Over." Dustin replied.

"Yeah," Lucas nodded before realizing Dustin couldn't see him. "Same for you. Over and out." Then he put the radio down and grabbed his backpack. His mom was much more likely to say yes to going to Dustin's on a school night if his homework was done.

~*~

Three hours later found Lucas sitting at the Henderson's dining table, he and Dustin knee deep in a story about their afternoon at AV club yesterday. As she always did, Ms. Henderson listened intently, asking

questions and engaging the boys.

It was a welcome change from the quiet dinners at Lucas' house.

As Lucas helped Dustin clear the table, Dustin asked, "You wanna go hang out upstairs for a little bit before you head home?"

"Sure," Lucas nodded before grinning at Ms. Henderson. "Thank you for dinner!" he smiled politely

"Anytime, sweetie! I love having you around," she cooed, pinching his cheek. Lucas just smiled at her over his shoulder as Dustin pulled him upstairs. Soon the pair were spread out on Dustin's floor, reading through comics and talking about whatever crossed their minds.

"So then I called Steve because I didn't know what the hell to do with it," Dustin rambled on about the stray dog he'd found after Lucas ditched him. "Its eyes were just so sad, but I couldn't get it up onto my bike obviously. But I knew Steve wouldn't put a stray in his car, so I called him from the gas station and told him my bike tire was flat. God, he was so mad when he showed up," Dustin laughed.

"What'd he say?" Lucas laughed, before an idea popped into his brain. If Dustin had Steve's number, that meant it would be written in the notebook by the Henderson's phone.

"He just grumbled about how if the dog pissed in his car I was paying to get it cleaned," Dustin shrugged. "And then we realized I couldn't keep it so we took it to the animal control," he huffed.

When the clock struck 8:00, that was Lucas' cue to leave. "Can I call my mom for a ride?" he asked Dustin. "I'm really tired and don't want to bike home," he lied – again. He had to stop this.

Max better appreciate this first date.

"Yeah, go ahead," Dustin waved Lucas off, and he made his way to the phone in the hall. As he suspected, on the pad of paper was a number followed by "Harrington's Taxi Cab Service". It wasn't Dustin or Ms. Henderson's writing, so Lucas figured it was Steve's himself.

Taking the pen by the phone, Lucas scribbled the number on his arm,

pushed his sleeve down, and then pretended to call his mom. Then he walked back into Dustin's room, shrugging. "They didn't answer, so I'll just go."

"I can ask my mom," Dustin offered, but Lucas shook his head.

"No thanks. No need for you guys to get back out. I'll see you at school tomorrow," he replied before making his way downstairs, saying one last goodbye to Ms. Henderson, and then riding home feeling like he had conquered the world.

~*~

It took a few days for Lucas to gather the courage to actually call Steve. There were a few times that Lucas would pick up the phone, but he couldn't bring himself to dial the number. But finally, early in the evening on Tuesday, Lucas got brave enough to complete the call. It rang in his ear, and Lucas gnawed his lip nervously while he waited.

"Lo?" Steve sounded disinterested on the phone.

"Steve?" Lucas perked up. Steve hung his head.

"Lucas? What the - how'd you get this number?" Steve asked. He narrowed his eyes. "Did Dustin give it to you?" He asked.

The little shit had promised not to give the number out. Steve was gonna hit him.

"No, he didnt," Lucas replied honestly. Finally, something about this situation that didn't require a lie.

"Then how did -"

"I'm good at what I do. Listen, Steve, I need your help," Lucas sounded so serious that suddenly Steve was worried.

"What's wrong Lucas? Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Well no, I mean, it's not bad, I just need your help because I don't know what to -"

“Lucas?”

“Yeah?”

“Spill.”

“I want to ask Max on a date,” Lucas finally said, and Steve felt his heart began to beat again.

“Kid, you can’t come tell me something’s wrong like that when we’ve been attacked by monsters twice, and you just want to ask out Red.” Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jesus.”

“Sorry,” Lucas frowned. “Can you help me?” He asked meekly.

“Can’t you ask your friends? They know Max better than I do,” Steve replied, though it was sort of a tease. He couldn’t just turn him away like that. Steve Harrington wasn’t a jerk.

Any more.

“Well, they don’t know much about dating. But you do. You’re like, the smartest when it comes to dating.” Lucas sounded so optimistic that it made Steve crack a smile. Okay, now he really did have to help him.

“What do you wanna know?” He asked, sinking into the arm chair beside the phone.

~*~

Lucas walked up to Max’s locker the next day, taking a deep breath. “Hi, Max,” he greeted a bit nervously.

“Hi!” Max smiled and turned to look at him. “Did you finish the math homework?”

“Yeah, I did. But hey, I wanted to ask you something,” Lucas pulled at the sleeve of his shirt, then immediately stopped.

Play it cool, Steve had told him.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to see a movie Friday after school?” Lucas tried not to look too interested.

“Uh, sure,” Max shrugged. “Do they know what movie?”

“They?” Lucas asked, thrown off guard. That wasn’t the yes or no he’d expected.

“The others. I figured they’d already chosen a movie,” Max tucked her hair behind her ear and looked away awkwardly.

“Oh, I meant just us. Like you and me. Like, you know, a date.”

Max’s expression changed, and for a moment Lucas’ breath caught in his throat. What if Max didn’t like him? What if she didn’t want to go on a date?

“I-I’d love that,” Max smiled suddenly. Lucas mirrored the grin.

“Really?” He almost couldn’t believe it. Max nodded and looked over her shoulder before looking back at Lucas expectantly. “Uh, well then I’ll see you at the flag pole after school on Friday,” he offered. “I’ll get us a ride.”

~*~

Steve couldn’t believe that not only was he a babysitter and advice giver, now he was a damn chauffeur, too.

In the back seat Lucas and Max were sat on opposite sides of the bench seat, looking out the windows silently.

“You know you guys can talk, right?” Steve asked. He was met with silence. Jesus, this was awful. “Come on. What movie are you seeing?”

“Back to the Future,” Lucas finally answered. “That was Max’s choice.”

“That’s a good movie,” Steve nodded. Then they lapsed back into

silence, and the teen gave up trying to make this situation any less awkward.

When he dropped them at the front of the movie theater and the kids got out of the car, Lucas poked his head back in. "Thanks for driving us," he said politely.

"Yeah, anytime. I'll be here at 6:45 to pick you up," Steve reminded him before reaching his hand out to fist bump Lucas. "Good luck, kid."

Lucas just grinned, then slammed the door and led Max up to the ticket booth. Steve watched as Lucas smoothly reached to take Max's hand, simultaneously opening the door to the theater to let her go inside first.

Maybe the kid had some hope after all, Steve thought.

7. Makeup

Summary for the Chapter:

Nancy and Jane get some girl time, and time to talk.

Hopper let El go to three places: The Byers' house (Jonathan and Joyce had already proven their ability to protect a million times over), The Harringtons' house (on occasion, only because the group would have sleepovers at Steve's massively empty home; and again, Steve had proved his ability to protect), and the Wheeler's house (because Mike would never leave Hop alone if he didn't allow her to go there – and Nancy would protect Jane).

The conversation with the Wheeler's had been strange. "So, she's your daughter?" Ted had asked, looking at the girl sat beside him. "And your friend? Since when?" this was directed at Mike, who smiled sheepishly.

"I met her a few days ago at the police station. I was down there with Dustin because he's writing a paper on what it's like to be police chief! Right, Hop?" the lie slid easily off Mike's tongue, and if the stakes hadn't been so high, Jim would have given the kid a look of 'Why the hell did you involve me?'

But instead, Jim just nodded and turned back to the Wheeler adults. "Yes, he did. Dustin asked a million questions as he does," he chuckled good naturedly, and Hopper thanked every deity possible that Mike's parents laughed along. "And Mike entertained Jane for me."

It took a while, but eventually Hopper felt halfway okay dropping Jane off at the Wheeler's house if Nancy was there, and if he drove by the Wheeler's house every half hour or so, that was unrelated.

Today Jane let herself into the house, figuring Mike was upstairs in his room. She made her way to the second floor and down the hall, stopping at the open bathroom door and waving to Nancy, who was standing in front of the mirror.

"Hi, Jane," Nancy smiled, turning to look at her. "I didn't know you were coming over today!"

"Hi," Jane smiled in reply. "What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"I'm putting on makeup," Nancy replied. "I'm supposed to hang out with Jonathan this afternoon," she smiled. "I can call him and tell him to come here instead," she murmured to herself.

"Pretty," Jane mentioned, recognizing a tube that looked a lot like the red stuff Mike had smeared on her lips last year before taking her to the school. And the stuff Kali had put all over her face. "Bitchin'," she added.

"I mean, I guess you could say that," Nancy agreed with a shrug. "Most people go with pretty though," she continued with a laugh.

"Why?" Jane asked, leaning against the door frame. Nancy thought about it for a moment, then shrugged.

"Why do people wear makeup? Well, some people do it to feel better about how they look – it gives them confidence," Nancy explained.

"Confidence," Jane repeated slowly.

"Do you know what that means?" Nancy asked; Jane shrugged. "It means that you believe in yourself. Like you know you're good at what you're doing," she explained.

"Believe in yourself," Jane parroted back quietly.

"Yeah. Other people wear it just because they like it," Nancy continued. She noticed that Jane was still staring at it unsurely, and she smiled. "We can try it on you if you want." Jane nodded eagerly, and Nancy mirrored the action. "Cool! Why don't you go say hi to Mike while I give Jonathan a call?" she suggested. "Then we can do it."

Jane nodded eagerly and rushed down to Mike's room. She opened the door and grinned at her friend, who sat up from where he was laying down and reading. "Hey, El!" he exclaimed. Usually he called

her Jane, but sometimes El just slipped out. It felt right.

“Hi, Mike. Nancy’s going to do my makeup,” Jane greeted, shuffling over to his bed. “What are you reading?” she asked.

“Just a comic book,” Mike answered before cocking his head to the side. “Why is Nancy doing your makeup?” he wondered.

“Confidence,” Jane grinned, then she shrugged. “Want to.” Mike really couldn’t argue with that, so he smiled and nodded.

“That’s cool,” he commented. “Do, uh, do you want me to watch?” he wondered awkwardly. Jane shrugged, because how was she supposed to know?

“Do you want to?” she wondered. Just then, Nancy poked her head into the room.

“You ready, Jane? Sorry, Mike, no boys allowed! Mandatory girl time,” she grinned at her brother, who rolled his eyes and flopped back onto his bed. But secretly, he was relieved. Makeup was boring.

Jane followed Nancy into the hallway and down to her bedroom. “I figured we’d be more comfortable sitting on my bed instead of you on the bathroom counter,” Nancy explained as she let Jane into the room.

In just a moment both girls were sitting on Nancy’s bed, makeup piled between their laps as Nancy sorted through it all. “So, how’s it feel to have a bit more freedom now?” Nancy wondered.

“Good,” Jane replied softly, watching Nancy intently. “Hop still gets nervous.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Do you?” Nancy asked, opening up a small container of red powder. “This is blush,” she explained. “It puts some extra color on your cheeks.”

“Sometimes,” Jane admitted. She closed her eyes and wrinkled her nose as a brush came into contact with her cheeks, which caused Nancy to smile. “But sometimes I get nervous at home too.”

"That's okay," Nancy promised softly as she swiped color onto Jane's cheek. "You went through a lot. You can be scared."

"Do you?" Jane asked suddenly. Nancy snapped the container of blush shut and moved to pick up a black tube.

"Get scared? Yeah. A lot," Nancy admitted. She unscrewed the tube and pulled out a small black brush.

"What's that?" Jane asked.

"Mascara. It goes on your eyes. Open wide, like you're surprised," Nancy suggested. She couldn't help but laugh at the facial expression Jane made. "But yeah, I get scared too. I think we all do." Carefully, Nancy brushed the black goop onto Jane's eyelashes, swiping her finger underneath Jane's eye to wipe away the excess makeup.

"How do you fix it?" Jane asked. Nancy stopped at that from where she was reaching for lipstick and sighed, looking to Jane.

"I don't know," Nancy admitted. "Sometimes I talk to Jonathan. Or Mike, Steve even, maybe. Just someone that understands." Jane nodded quietly, and Nancy smiled softly, reaching out to tuck a curl of hair behind Jane's ear. "You know you can talk to us right? I'm here, Mike's here, I know Hop wants to help you however he can."

"Okay," Jane agreed, smiling at Nancy. Nancy patted her cheek before picking up the tube of lipstick.

"Alright, here's the fun part," Nancy told her, twisting up the red makeup. "Open your mouth for me." Jane complied easily and Nancy gently put the makeup on her lips. Then Nancy leaned back and smiled widely at Jane. "Well, would you look at that?" she smiled. "All done!"

"Really?" Jane grinned, tentatively reaching up and touching her lips.

"Really," Nancy smiled, gesturing to the mirror. "Go look." Jane immediately jumped up and walked over to Nancy's vanity and smiled at her reflection. The makeup wasn't nearly as dark as what Kali had put on her that night, and it was definitely cleaner than the makeup Mike had put on her.

“Pretty,” Jane breathed, looking over her shoulder at Nancy. “Thank you,” she grinned.

“Anytime, dear,” Nancy replied, moving to stand by her. “But hey, just remember you’re always pretty. Even without makeup,” she placed her hand on Jane’s shoulder and squeezed it lightly. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Jane agreed. Suddenly, she turned and gave Nancy a hug. Nancy looked down in surprise and hugged her back. “I’m glad you’re Mike’s sister,” she said softly.

“I’m glad you’re Mike’s friend,” Nancy replied, ruffling Jane’s hair. “I’m glad you came into our lives.”

“Me too,” Jane whispered. “So glad.”

8. Christmas at the Hendersons

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve visits the Henderson home for Christmas.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry I've been gone for so long, you guys! If any of you read my other story, you know I've moved halfway across my state and started a new, insane job!!

But here's a Christmas chapter ON Christmas for y'all! (There are FOUR MINUTES left of Christmas Day!) So please enjoy, and Happy Holidays!!

Steve had grown accustomed to being at the Munchkins' beck and call. No longer was he surprised when he answered the ringing phone and on the other end was one of the kids asking him for advice, or even more commonly, a ride.

So Steve was less than surprised when he was asked to taxi the Munchkins to and from the mall in the weeks leading up to Christmas. And if Steve hated trying to get through the mall during the holidays by himself, trying to keep track of the kids was even worse. But he did it, because if he didn't, who else would? Beside parents, of course. Or siblings. A lot of people, actually, Steve realized. But by the time he realized this, Steve was three stores in with Dustin, who was shopping last minute for his mother.

"What's your family doing for Christmas, Steve?" Dustin asked as the two of them fought through the crowds. Steve shrugged and stepped out of the way of a stroller being pushed by a tired looking mom.

"I don't think we're really doing anything," he admitted. "My parents aren't coming home until late that night."

"Your parents aren't *home* on Christmas?!" Dustin sounded scandalized. Steve shrugged again, turning to look at Dustin.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he chuckled. He didn’t voice this, but this was the normal for Steve. His parents hadn’t been home FOR Christmas since Steve was like, twelve. “We’re celebrating the next day,” he lied.

“Oh, ok, that’s better,” Dustin nodded. “But still, you can come to my house for Christmas!” he gasped, stopping in his tracks.

“Thanks, kid, but I’ll pass. You guys have holiday traditions and shit. I’m not looking to impose,” Steve insisted. “Hey, stop trying to save the world and just come on. You’ve got to find a present for your mom.” He hit Dustin’s shoulder and laughed, the boy following after him with a sigh.

“It’s not imposing. My mom would kill me if she knew I let you be alone,” Dustin pointed out. “Besides, it’s just me and my mom. Our only tradition is cinnamon rolls for breakfast and then opening gifts. You can easily be a part of that.” Steve looked down at the determined boy beside him and reached out to flick the edge of his baseball cap.

“We’ll see, kid. How’s that sound?” Steve relented, and Dustin finally nodded and continued on his way through the mall. Steve shook his head and followed after Dustin, just trying to keep up with him in the crowded stores.

And that’s how Steve ended up standing on the Henderson’s front porch at eight AM Christmas morning, arms full of bottles of orange juice and some last minute gifts for Dustin, as well as some flowers for Mrs. Henderson.

Steve had barely rang the doorbell when the door was thrown open by Dustin, and Steve immediately bit back a laugh. “Merry Christmas!” Dustin grinned, standing in the doorway wearing the most ridiculously red and green set of pajamas. Covered in kittens. Wearing Santa hats.

“Is that cats dressed like Santa?” Steve asked in a low voice, smirking.

“Look. My mom bought me Christmas pajamas. I had to wear them

okay?” Dustin sighed. “Now are you coming in for Christmas or not?” he huffed. Dustin stepped to the side and Steve stepped into the house, immediately feeling like he’d stepped into one of those cheesy Christmas movies.

Absolutely everything was decorated for Christmas. There were lights, garland, and tinsel all over the place. In the air Steve could smell cinnamon rolls and bacon, and his mouth immediately started to water. “Mom! Steve’s here!” Dustin called into the house. Then he turned back to Steve and eyed the presents. “You didn’t have to bring presents,” he stated slowly, taking the orange juice from his hands

“Of course I did,” Steve replied, following Dustin into the living room. “You invited me, didn’t ya? Think I’d show up without gifts?” As he turned the corner, where there was a massive Christmas tree surrounded by presents. Steve dropped the presents into the mix and then turned as he heard Mrs. Henderson walk in.

“Steve!” she gasped, hurrying over to hug him. “I’m so glad you came!”

“Well thanks for inviting me, Ms. Henderson,” Steve replied, pulling away from the hug and presenting the flowers to her.

“Well, of course! You’re one of Dustin’s best friends, which means you’re family,” she continued. “And call me Claudia,” she insisted. “These are beautiful, sweetie.” Steve smiled charmingly and rubbed the back of his neck. “Come on then, boys!” Claudia sang. “Breakfast is waiting!”

After a couple of moments, the three were surrounding the kitchen table passing around plates of cinnamon rolls, bacon, and eggs, as well as cups of orange juice and coffee. To Steve’s surprise, he was completely at ease, chatting with Dustin and Ms. Henderson like he did it on the regular.

Steve offered to clear the table once everyone was done eating, and immediately Ms. Henderson began to argue that he didn’t have to do that. “Oh hush,” Steve chided gently. “You invited me here and I will clear the dishes,” he smiled at her before whisking her plate away.

Then the three of them moved to the living room, Claudia and Steve still sipping on coffee while Dustin flitted around the living room, stacking presents in front of his mother and his spot on the couch. Steve just watched him in amusement – Dustin was so freaking excited, but trying to remain mature and calm about it, obviously since Steve was here.

Steve apparently had disappeared into his own head, and when he came to, Dustin was placing two small packages at his feet. “What’s this?” Steve asked slowly.

“Presents,” Dustin responded, the perfect amount of ‘duh’ in his voice.

“You didn’t have to get me anything!” Steve insisted, looking between the two Hendersons.

“You’re my friend,” Dustin said in way of explanation. “Of course I got you something.” After all presents were handed out, Dustin sat down beside Steve and looked around. “Well, who’s going first?”

“I mean, you have the most to get through,” Steve laughed. “Why don’t you open a couple?” And so that’s how the morning progressed, with Dustin opening all his presents, sufficiently excited with each one. Steve was actually quite entertained with watching him open all his gifts, a smile in place on his face and not wavering as Dustin ripped open the Ghostbusters calendar Steve had found for him.

“Dude, this is awesome! Thank you!” Dustin gasped, clutching the calendar to his chest. “Okay, okay! You open one!”

“Alright, alright,” Steve relented, reaching down to his feet. “Which one first?”

“The biggest one, because you can use it today,” Dustin stated, looking to his mom. “Right?”

“Right,” she agreed, smiling. Steve, not one to argue with adults, ripped into the wrapping paper and began to laugh as he pulled out the most ridiculous Christmas sweater. Colored bright red, it showcased a reindeer wearing sunglasses on the front of it. Beneath

the reindeer were the words, 'cool ride'.

"It's because you have a really cool car," Dustin explained through the giggles, and Steve laughed even harder.

"I love it!" he cackled, realizing that he really, truly did. It was the best Christmas gift he'd gotten in a while. So immediately, he pulled it on over his head and stood to model it. "How's it look?" he wondered.

"So handsome," Claudia squealed, standing up. "Let me get my camera!" she called over her shoulder. "I have to get a picture of you two!"

"Mooooooooom!" Dustin groaned. But obediently, both boys posed while she took a few pictures, and Steve took an offered Polaroid, grinning at the photo.

"If you show any of the other Munchkins, I will kill you," Steve teased. Dustin rolled his eyes.

"We'll see," he responded before diving back into his presents. As the number of wrapped gifts in front of him dwindled, Claudia opened a few gifts, and then it was Steve's turn again. "Do this one," Dustin requested, handing him the smaller of the two remaining packages.

It was a small jewelry container, Steve realized, and opening it revealed a keychain shaped like a license plate that obviously said 'STEVEN', but the 'N' was crossed out. "They didn't have Steve by itself," Dustin explained sheepishly. "But it looked really cool in the store and I wanted to make sure you had stuff to open when you said you'd come over," Dustin's cheeks burned bright red, and Steve reached out to ruffle the curly mop Dustin called hair.

"It's awesome," he promised, pulling out his keys and adding it to his key chain right there on the couch. "I love it, Dus. Thanks." Steve sat back against the couch in quiet contemplation, trying not to think too hard about the fact that this was his best Christmas *ever*, and this wasn't even his own family.

Fuck that, yes it was. Anyone willing to pull in a lonely teenager on

Christmas and buy him gifts? That made them family.

Eventually, they made it down to the last gift for all three of them. Claudia unwrapped a photo of her and Tews framed in a gold photo frame that Steve recognized from his trip to the mall with Dustin. "I love it, baby!" she gasped, clutching it to her chest. "It's going next to the picture of Mews in my office," she insisted.

"Good plan, Ma," Dustin smiled softly, and Steve reached out to squeeze Dustin's shoulder at the mention of the other cat. *Rest in peace, Mews*, Steve thought to himself.

"Your turn," Steve insisted, gesturing to the box in Dustin's hands. Dustin argued for a moment, trying to get Steve to open his last gift, but the older teen was stubborn, and finally Dustin unwrapped a new bicycle helmet.

"Cool!" Dustin grinned. "It matches my bike! And my backpack! Thanks, Mom!" Then he turned to Steve with wide eyes. "Okay, *now* you have to open this one. And this one's kinda from all of us, not just me," he explained. "We were going to give it to you at the New Year's party Hopper's having later, but then you showed up here, so I figured now was a good time," Dustin explained before gesturing to Steve. "Go on! Open it!"

"All of you were involved in this? Now I really am worried," Steve laughed, though he pulled away at the paper and pulled out a notebook with Will's handwriting on the front, spelling out 'Our Party'.

Quietly, Steve thumbed through the notebook, a quiet smile settling on his face. "Dustin, this is so cool," he whispered. Each page was dedicated to a kid, with information about each one below their school pictures. It had information like birthdays, phone numbers, family members, pets, allergies, likes and dislikes, all that stuff that Steve desperately wanted to keep straight with everyone but always seemed to mix up.

He quickly realized that each kid had done their own page. Will had drawn sketches on his page, Mike's chicken-scratch he called handwriting was very identifiable, and Lucas' cursive was almost

impeccable. Eleven seemed to have Hopper help with her page, and instead of a photograph, Will had drawn a great picture (except, not *too* great, Steve realized. Must have been Hopper's doing). Even Jonathan and Nancy had pages done, Nancy's swoopy handwriting causing Steve's heart to tug at the memory of long-ago notes left in lockers for him to find. There was even a page for him to fill out, blank save for his school photo. "How we got that is a secret, don't even ask," Dustin had quipped immediately.

"Dustin," Steve whispered after some time of looking through the book, looking up at him. "This is so awesome. You don't even know."

Dustin ducked his head shyly and shrugged. "We thought it'd be kinda cool. Like your own D&D manual, except it's real life and your fr – it's us."

"My friends," Steve nodded, closing the book and opening his arms for a rather uncharacteristic hug. "Thanks, Dustin," he whispered into Dustin's ear, and Dustin squeezed him tighter in response.

It was a great moment that Steve wanted to cherish forever. Then there was a flash and the tell-tale sign of a Polaroid printing, and Steve laughed as Dustin shouted, "MOM!" as they pulled away.

Steve just took the Polaroid with a grin. That would definitely make it easier to remember.

And the notebook sat on Steve's desk the remainder of high school. Above it, tacked to his bulletin board was the picture of him and Dustin standing in their matching Christmas sweaters that day. Inside the back cover of the notebook was the picture of him and Dustin hugging.

And Steve didn't tell anyone this, but every time his empty house got a little too lonely, he'd flip through the book of the party and learn a little bit more about each one of them. Then he really didn't feel as lonely, because even though his parents were gone, Steve realized the rest of his family was just spread all around Hawkins.